

Introduction:

Why Nature?

Some Reflections

On the Nature/Civilization Dialectic

Deep Ecology & Nature Writing: The Why and the Wherefore

After college, after completing my BA in English at UCSB, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do for a living, other than write. So rather than jump into a 9-5 workday routine, I headed for nature—and the mountains of the American West in particular. Hoping to buy a little time, until the answer of what to do for a living appeared to me. Thus began a decade-long odyssey, in which I spent the next ten years moving ever deeper into the American wilderness: beginning in Yosemite, from which I was drawn into the Grand Teton/Yellowstone wilderness. There I met one of the foremost female environmental advocates and activists, Mardie Murie, wife of the fame naturalist, Olaus Murie, whose brother Adolf wrote one of the most acclaimed works of American nature writing: *The Wolves of McKinley*. Mardie and Olaus had lived in the Tetons since the 1930s, when Olaus was hired as a biologist to find out what was killing the elk herds: wolves or some other agent of morbidity. They had met, fallen in love, married, and worked in Alaska during the first 30 years of the century: studying wolves and caribou, following the great Porcupine River herd on its annual migration (all captured in Mardie's book *Two in the Far North*). Because of their work, the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge was created. They went on to found the Wilderness Society, to this day one of the most effective environmental advocate groups, along with Muir's Sierra Club, The Nature Conservancy, Green Peace etc.

During my meeting with Mardie in her Teton cabin, she spoke so eloquently of Alaska, often with a tear in her eye for the memories of Olaus it triggered, that I decided I must see for myself this place that always put a sparkle in her blue eyes when she mentioned it. Which is how I became an Alaska Bush Teacher two years later, teaching for three years on a remote Athabasca Indian reservation. This experience later became the subject of my Dissertation and my first book, *Words in the Wilderness*, which went on to win a national award. Thus began my abiding interest in Nature and Nature Writing—which has only grown over the years.

Questions for Critical Inquiry:

Our Inquiry into Nature Writing and the Eco-Conflicts associated with it begins (as any significant inquiry must) with a series of Critical Questions, as follows:

- What is our relationship to nature? What should it be? What has been your relationship to nature? Has it changed? Does it need to change? Does our nation and the world's attitude toward nature need to change? If so how?
- To some, Nature is *a treasure trove of resources to be extracted* for our benefit, survival, convenience, and/or profit: a source of economic growth. What is problematic with this view?
- To Others, Nature has long been a source of subsistence and spirituality? What are the implications of this approach to Nature?
- To others still, Nature is a savage, untamed world, “red in tooth and claw” as Jack London observes, that needs to be tamed? What are the implications of this approach?

- To others yet, Nature is a vital means of escape from the excesses of the Industrial Order and Modernity: a fount of healing, renewal, and regeneration? What are the implications and/or problems associated with this approach?
- National Parks: Preservation or Recreation? Which is the more important purpose of our National Parks? Are we at risk of loving our national parks to death? What should be done? Should autos be banned from Yosemite and Yellowstone? Off road vehicles?
- Nature, Gender, and Identity: Has Nature been codified in a way that reinforces gender stereotypes: both masculine and feminine? How deeply embedded in our national sense of identity is American Nature--and the America West in particular? What is the relationship between Nature and Identity? Is the history of our relationship to Nature a gendered history? What are the origins of this need to code Nature as a medium of hyper-masculinity?
- Is nature always and already a political and/or religious as well as a natural landscape?
- To what extent do these Nature Writers use nature for a deep exploration of the Self?
- The Ethics of Eco-Activism: Is “monkey-wrenching” (tree-spiking, sabotage of illegal whaling vessels, destruction of heavy equipment vehicles etc) a legitimate form of activism to protest environmental degradation? Are less violent forms of law-breaking such as trespassing on a National Monument (Lame Deer, “Sitting on top of Teddy Roosevelt’s Head” (Ch 5), legitimate forms of eco-activism?
- Of all the eco-problems facing the world today, which in your opinion is/are the most urgent to address? Why? How might it/they be usefully addressed? If you could educate your peers, the UNLV community, and/or the broader community in which we live (local, regional, national, and global) on a specific environmental problem, which one

would it be? After analyzing and assessing the causes and effects of this problem, what solutions would you advocate to address it? How might you go about drawing attention to its causes, effects, and solutions in a voluntary presentation? Operating on the premise that heightened awareness is the precondition for meaningful social action.

- Is the assumption we are independent of (or apart from) Nature a problematic, if not dangerous, illusion? Have we been conditioned to see Nature through the lens of a false, Nature/Civilization binary opposition, which shuts down the dialectic synergy between them? Reducing a mutual, relational dynamic to a utilitarian one? What role might education play in altering this utilitarian Nature-Civilization dyad toward a more mutually beneficial Nature-Civilization relationship?
- Do we preserve nature to preserve that part of the Self that is made whole by it? In laying waste to nature, is the Self impoverished as well? Is it not just species that become extinct, but also that part of the Self that is nourished by them?
- Were Native American attitudes toward the Earth ahead of their time to the extent they modeled a sustainable relationship to it? Do they provide a template for a re-configured relationship to the planet—and planetary life? Like our native forebears, must we too learn to walk the earth as if our souls were in the soles of our feet?